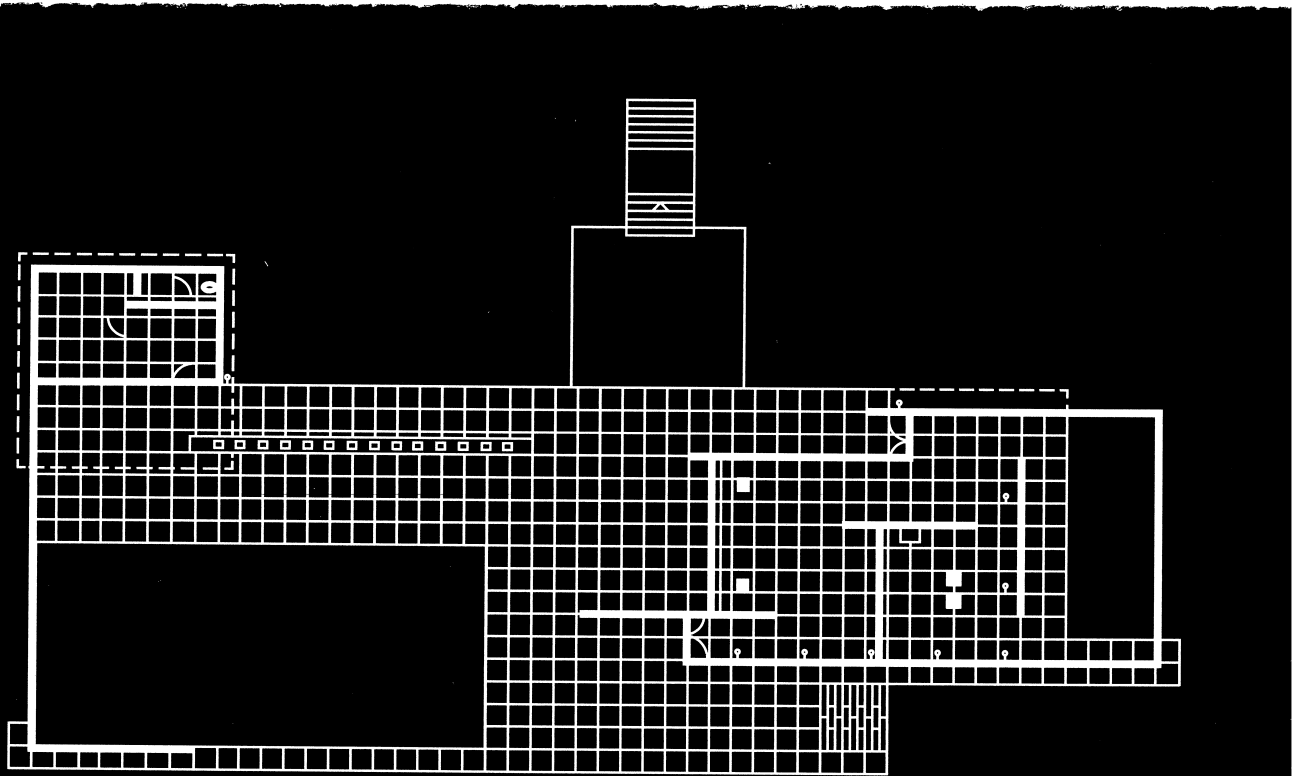


Oana Stănescu (OS)

Oana Stănescu is a New York–based architect and educator. In 2021, Stanescu, along with the German architecture practice Something Fantastic, organized a lecture and workshop at Syracuse University School of Architecture titled 'Covers, Covers, Covers', which investigated the idea of a cover version across a broad spectrum of media. Looking at examples from Cat Power to Alvar Aalto, Mies van der Rohe to Martin Margiela, the speakers presented various case studies that expanded the traditional notion of a cover far beyond its musical origins. The lecture, in addition to Stănescu's architectural collaborations with Virgil Abloh, made me curious about how she saw bootlegging play out in the field of architecture. Our conversation, however, found Stănescu at a unique crossroads in her career after recently dissolving her previous studio FAMILY, and at the cusp of starting her own office. Rather than discuss bootleg buildings, we spoke about the liberating potential of a "bootleg practice"—subverting the rules and expectations of a studio that so often go unconsidered. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: I really enjoyed your recent lecture at Syracuse on cover versions. What inspired this lecture and workshop?

OS: I've had this idea of working with covers for a while now and my goal has been to make a multidisciplinary exhibition which deals with this notion of a "cover" in different aspects of music and architecture, art and writing. There's no creative field that doesn't have some kind of parallel or its own version of a cover. There is even a legal aspect to it, which is of interest to me, and that's where things tend to break down. It all feels really relevant now given this kind of cultural moment we are in. So this idea of a multidisciplinary exhibition has been on my mind for a long time, but until we get there we have this workshop that myself along with Something Fantastic have developed. It felt important because people tend to feel very fragile about covers and the theory and baggage they seem to involve. But really our idea for the workshop involves ideas as banal as saying you can learn a practice by covering it—which is widely accepted when it comes to learning an instrument by playing songs by other artists. In architecture, this is less accepted as a way of learning. Yet when I look back at my time in architecture school, one of the most valuable exercises we did was to rebuild or redraw a Tadao Ando house from scratch. In doing so, you get to know it in an intimate and unique way that you wouldn't get just from looking at plans.

In all the studios I've worked in, and the places I've taught, this notion of the cover is rarely discussed. And I think in architecture, there's still this myth of the genius architect and originality. There's

an obsession with looking for the new thing, and I was interested in the simplicity and really the validity of the cover as a creative process. I might be wrong, but it feels more acceptable in Europe than in the U.S. There seems to be less of an obsession with trying to reinvent and a more open mindset with drawing upon certain ideas or objects. In the U.S., there seems to be more of a focus on: what's the brand? What's original? Which doesn't always lead to great things. Introducing the idea of the cover is a way of trying to loosen up the creative conversation and combat the polarization of things like Instagram and a lack of actual conversation. The reality of media, and the ingestion of information, all operate on the same spectrum as the individual genius. We love building them up, and we love tearing them down.

In my most idealistic, wildest dreams, this push for the cover would really just evolve into a new cultural way of thinking. It would reset our expectations. Because as a creator, the moment you let ego and authorship go, there's an immense freedom to just create. Ideally, we would be able to let go of these expectations of ourselves or others driven by this mythical authorial figure.

> BS: What excites me about covers is their ability to become progressive rather than just mimetic. A cover can be so much more than a copy. In the best covers, authorship becomes totally blurred...

OS: Right, there's an element to all of this that forces us to acknowledge that nothing we do is original, that everything is built on something from the past. What

I find most fascinating about this conversation is that some people identify themselves fully with their work. So the moment you remove some of this myth of originality, it destroys a person's identity. This all ties back to how we define success, because we're still distracted by the things that happen out in the open—social media likes, for example. But the most interesting things don't actually happen at that level. The interesting things are rarely at the surface, but still it's hard not to be distracted by that level of the conversation.

BS: For you, what makes a powerful cover? What does it take for a cover to transcend its source?

OS: I don't think there's a single way in which that happens, but I think there is a point where a cover can become its own thing. A good cover builds on the original, it doesn't take away from it. It couldn't exist without it, but at the same time, it is its own thing in an unquestionable way. In the lecture, we talked about the Alvar Aalto stool and the Ikea "cover," which would have actually been a dream for Aalto to see because he wanted it to become more commercial. Or the plexi version, which works because the shape of the chair is much truer to that material than to the wood. I remember at one point I was working at SANAA in Japan. One of the partners was working on a house, and at one point it started looking like the Prada Aoyama building by Herzog & de Meuron in Tokyo. I remember at the time everyone on the team was freaking out because there was a similarity in a certain type of geometry.

The only person who didn't care was the partner, Kazuyo Sejima, because for her, it was one step

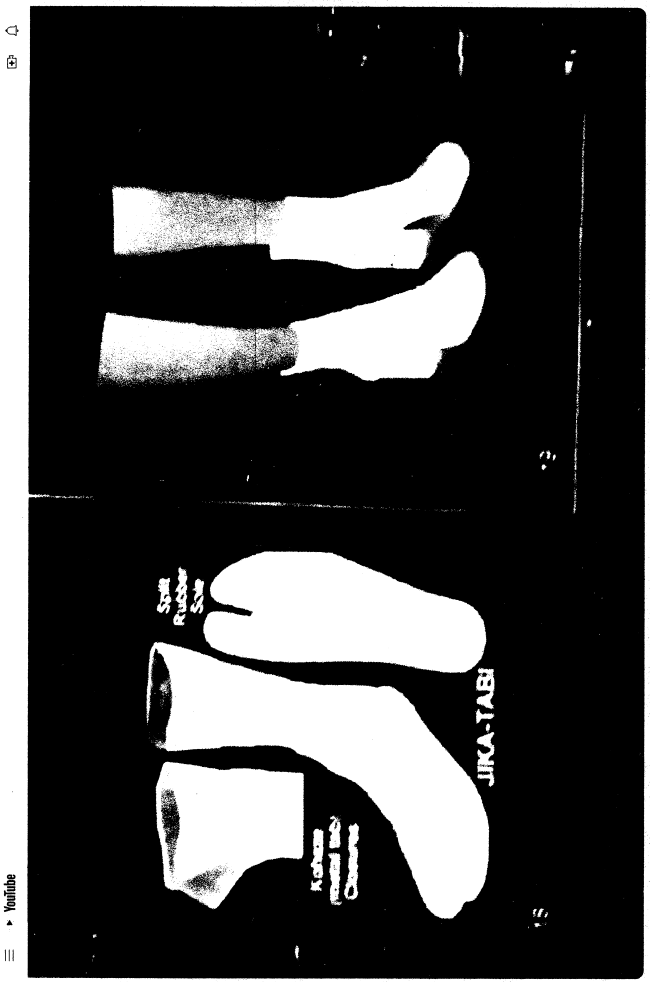
out of a long process. At least in architecture, things can take years to arrive at the final solution. And that always stuck with me, her calmness and coolness in remaining unfazed by all of that.

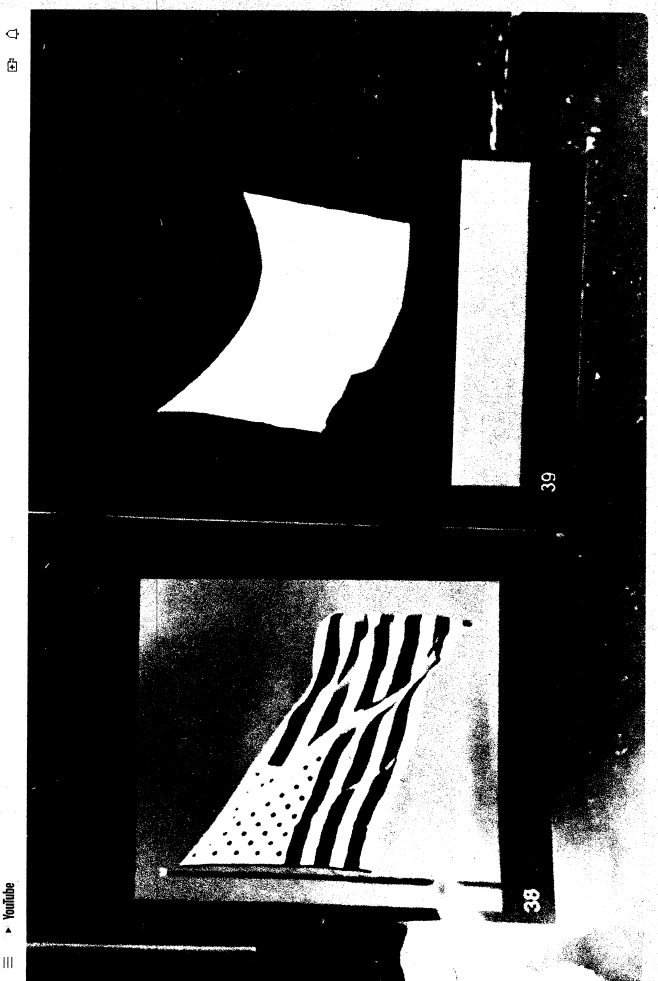
BS: How did the students react to this workshop? Was there anything in particular they struggled with?

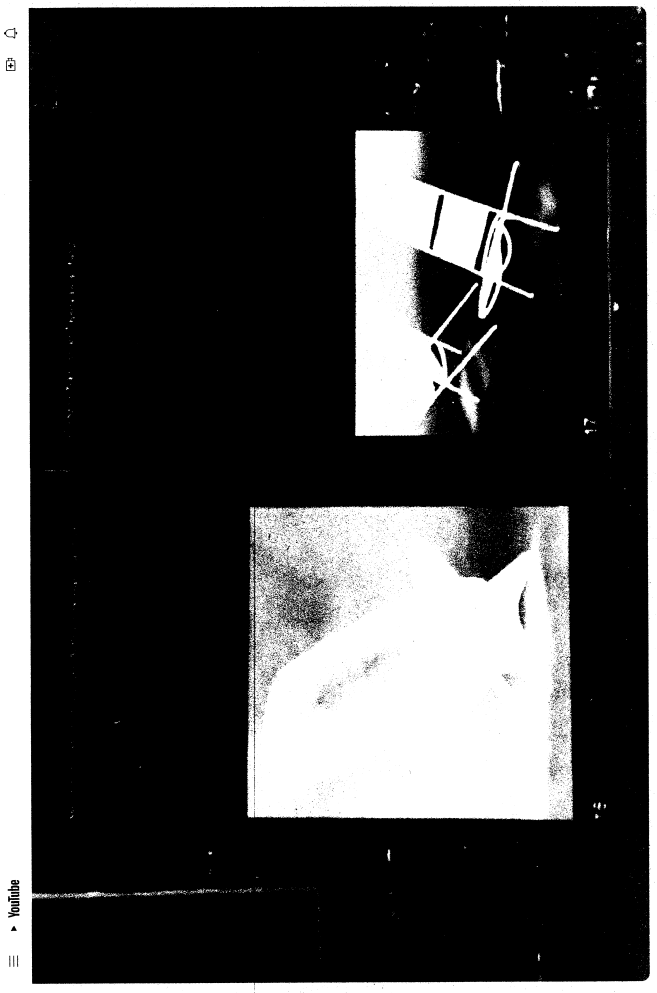
OS: I'm hoping to do this workshop in multiple iterations in different contexts. I think there's so much richness within the conversation, and I want to make sure to have the time and space to explore it. In this case, it was first year students in their second semester, so many of them were somewhat new to architecture. I think it was a great moment to try it out because there was less of a struggle to undo deeply rooted ideologies, and more so just giving them the freedom to run with different ideas. I think there were a lot of questions as to what actually makes a cover, and what are the rules of a cover, and I was really just trying to get them to open up to the idea.

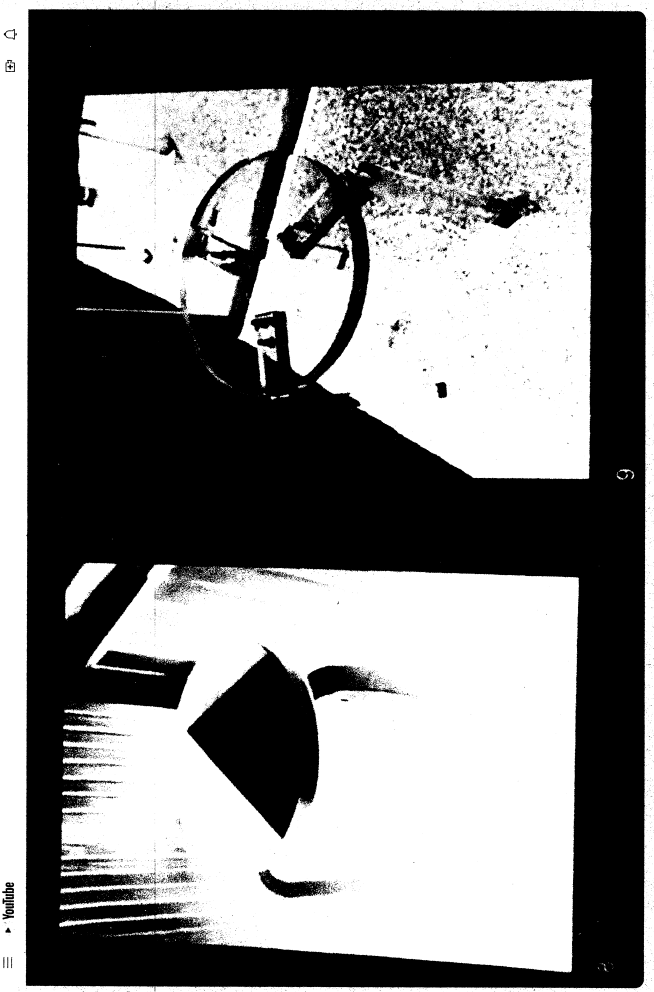
I think what was intriguing for students was that the idea of a cover tied in part to larger cultural conversations. Things in architecture tend to be very insular and removed from what's happening in the world around you, because of the long timelines. So I think the workshop allowed them to draw parallels to things outside of the practice and effected their cultural and conceptual understanding of the world... at least I hope.

pp. 350–353: Stills from 'Covers, Covers, Covers' a lecture for Syracuse University of Architecture School by Oana Stănescu with Something Fantastic (2021)


YouTube
JIKA-TABI


39
38
YouTube


YouTube


YouTube

BS: And what about in your own practice? Has this focus on covering affected your process at all? Do any projects of yours come to mind where some of this thinking feels particularly important?

OS: Not in a direct way, at least not yet. If anything, it's influenced more so how I am trying to work and run my practice rather than directly affecting the projects I am working on right now. I was in a partnership before and we had worked together for nearly a decade and eventually just wanted different things. It became very clear to me that I wasn't interested in having just another architecture office (nothing against architecture offices). I wasn't quite sure how that would manifest itself, but in the beginning, everyone is telling you what an office is or should be—you need a website, you need to model your practice after this or that architect, et cetera. There is a lot of pressure, and for a long time you just can't answer it.

I very intentionally began to think about how to avoid falling into a trap of just running an office. With architecture, projects get big really quickly and you need staff, you need people to work with. So you end up working with people and of course there still needs to be some structural hierarchy, but I've been trying to work more with a network of collaborators. It's less about being stuck in one partnership, and more about embracing many partnerships on different projects.

Even with the name, it's just my name. Most people that I ended up working with were clients who I had a personal rapport with and to create some sort of brand felt fake in many ways. In that sense, it's my name but I want to be able to put any other name

next to it. My goal is to sign the projects with the initials of everyone working on it.

> BS: It makes me wonder what a bootleg architectural office looks like. Does something like that resonate with your office at all?

OS: I would use the word hijacking instead. I feel like in any creative project, it's a bit like a game where you set up the rules and parameters that you want to work within. Quite often, we forget to question some of those variables that we set up to begin with. It's the same with practice, you forget to question some of those aspects of your life because you have only so many hours in a day.

To me, the interesting thing with the bootleg is that it has a lot to do with the stupidity of rules and permissions, right? It creates an incentive to find a way around things. It creates access, it fills a particular need. I mean, that was how I discovered music growing up—through bootleg CDs. So, for me, the point of trying to reorient myself in how I do the work came out of the need to reject expectations. Now it seems so banal and obvious, but it took me quite a while to get there. This new formation of a practice came out of a need to find new and different ways of working, because the old ones just weren't fitting.

Title page (p. 344): Diagram of the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe (1928) featured in 'Covers, Covers, Covers' a lecture for Syracuse University of Architecture School by Oana Stănescu with Something Fantastic (2021)